
5.0 CONSERVATION PARKS

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Although not formally open to the public, the current ‘undeveloped parks’ are sustaining some limited uses by surrounding residents for trails and nature related uses. At present there is significant interest by the public and trails groups to formally open Hunters Creek Park, and a significant effort was undertaken in the study to identify an appropriate level of use for this site. It is expected that as interest in outdoor, nature-based activities grows, the County will be under pressure to ‘open’ or endorse uses in the other undeveloped parks. In recognition of this, these sites are proposed as “Conservation Parks” within the Master Plan classification system. The sites contain significant natural areas, however, and each site will need to be carefully evaluated to determine its carrying capacity, and appropriate levels and zones of use, prior to formally opening them as parks.

The following general uses are suggested for the Conservation Parks, subject to more detailed evaluation of the natural resources contained within each site.

- *Protection of important natural and cultural heritage features;*
- *Management and enhancement of environmental resources, i.e. forest management, fisheries and other wildlife enhancement;*
- *Self-directed, resource-oriented outdoor recreation, that complement the unique and natural features of each site, without compromising the environmental integrity, i.e. fishing, nature enjoyment, trails uses.*
- *Development of trails of a type suited to a natural park environment, with a hierarchy based on types of use and skill level; Identifying appropriate use areas and trail routes; Install proper safety measures and trail signage/ markings.*
- *Potential future development of low-key supporting facilities such as trailheads, modest comfort facilities (restrooms), informal parking areas, information/ interpretive kiosks, directional/way finding signage;*
- *If appropriate, develop modest facilities for outdoor education programming, e.g. open-air shelters, etc. if funding is available (special grants may provide*

necessary “seed” money).

- Establish perimeter landscape buffers in appropriate locations.

5.1 HUNTERS CREEK PARK

(SGT. MARK RADEMACHER PARK)

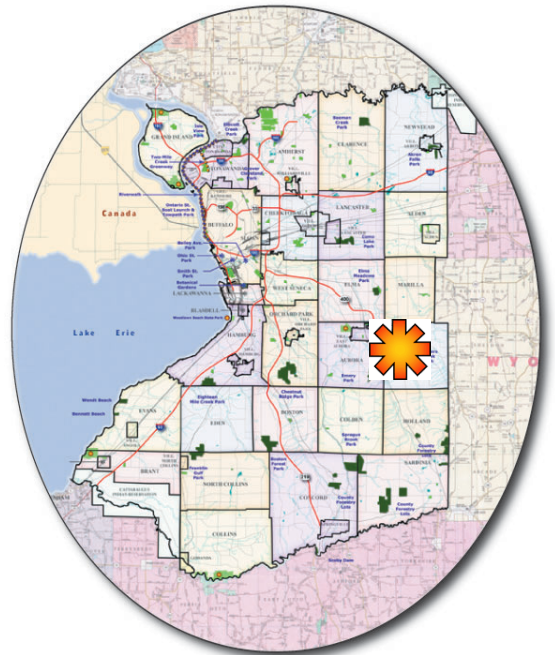
DESCRIPTION

The Park that is officially named Sgt. Mark Rademacher Park, is more commonly referred to as “Hunters Creek Park.” This 760-acre park is currently an undeveloped County-owned property within the Town of Wales, just east of the Village of East Aurora. This property has seen much activity over the past few years in the way of nature trail use by hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians and cross-country skiers. In particular, Hunters Creek has become extremely popular for mountain biking, which is one of the fastest growing sports in the country. The sloping terrain and Creek gorge help to define the park’s character, as well as a primarily forested interior.

The main park area is roughly square, with a “panhandle” extending to the north and east. The Creek divides the park into an east half and west half (accounting for roughly two-thirds of the area). After flowing off park property, the Creek re-enters the park at the northeast corner, roughly paralleling the narrow north property line. The Park currently has dirt road “service” roads and an extensive “community-built” trail network throughout the park. Two parking areas exist; one off of Hunters Creek Road and one at the intersection of Centerline and Vermont Hill Road. The southern parking area has been closed due to concerns with local neighbors.

PARK AND AREA HISTORY

The history of the area we now refer to as Hunters Creek Park began tens of thousands of years ago with the formation of the area topography and dramatic creek gorge. Following the area’s settlement, this property consisted of farm land and woods. Foundations of old homesteads and barns can still be seen. In the park’s interior, a large log cabin was constructed by Sanford Hubbard for the Kellog family as a hunting lodge. Only the fieldstone chimney and foundation remains.



In the 1950s parallel underground gas transmission lines were constructed through the area in an east-west direction and a major transmission station was constructed on Rieter Road. In the early 1970s, several parcels totaling approximately 760 acres were purchased by Erie County using Federal and State funds for a future park. Hunters creek bisects this undeveloped county property and cuts an impressive gorge through a portion of it. Around that same time, a number of roads and trails were constructed by county sponsored groups and the Boy Scouts planted thousands of evergreen trees. In recent years some of these roads and trails have eroded and deteriorated, while other trails have been further developed and improved.

In 1983, the Erie County Legislature voted unanimously to approve a resolution to rename Hunters Creek Park to “Sgt. Mark A. Rademacher Memorial Park.” Mark Rademacher was a 20 year old Town of Wales resident who was one of the few US Army Rangers killed in the Grenada Invasion in November, 1983. To highlight, little actual recognition was given to this new name at the actual park property, i.e. no signs were erected or no other verification can be found, but there are other memorial remembrances within the Town of Wales. Today, other than a trail that bears the Rademacher name, most people still refer to the park as “Hunters Creek Park.”

In 1995 the access road to the pipelines was reconstructed on this county property and the steep banks on both sides of the creek were repaired by the private gas company. Unfortunately due to improper drainage, part of this road has eroded and is in need of repair.

In recent years, with the growth of mountain biking as a recreational activity, the use of the park has dramatically increased as it has been termed “ideal” for single track riding. It has become a regional draw attracting people from some distances away for the trail activities.

Currently this property receives little to no county maintenance. Volunteers and local organizations have maintained the park on a regular basis by removing trash and maintaining the trails. Given recent problems with certain neighbor’s concerns and unregulated use of the park, it has become evident that a proper management plan is needed for this popular undeveloped county park.

LOCAL CONTEXT

This park site is located within the Town of Wales in eastern Erie County. The site is approximately 20 miles to the south and east of downtown Buffalo, and is about 3 miles southeast of the Village of East Aurora. Also, the park is only 2 miles north of Emery Park, another major County Park facility. Access to the park is from either Hunters Creek Road on the east or Centerline Road at Vermont Hill Road to the south. The area surrounding the park is largely rural in nature with active farms and large open tracts of undeveloped land. Residential properties are scattered along both Centerline and Hunters Creek Roads.

RECREATIONAL CONTEXT

Few other parks equal the use and beauty of Hunters Creek park. Other area park facilities that compliment the passive recreational uses at Hunters Creek are Emery Park in Aurora and the Knox Farm State Park in East Aurora. Other facilities offering “active” recreational opportunities exist in town parks in Wales and Aurora/East Aurora, as well as at local schools.

CURRENT ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

With the rapid increase in popularity and use at Hunters Creek Park also has come numerous issues and concerns. Some of these include, but are not limited to:

- A lack of an overall park management plan.*
- A concern of environmental sustainability*
- A concern for perimeter properties / trespassing*
- A lack of respect to neighbors by certain park users*
- Issues with current parking and access*
- A concern for emergency access*
- A concern over trail use and long-term maintenance*
- A lack of rules and regulations*
- A lack of signage and clear trail markers*
- A concern for safety and liability.*

MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

NEARBY PARKS WITH UNIQUE FEATURES

(WITHIN A 5-MILE RADIUS)

Town of Wales:

- *Kenneglenn Scenic and Nature Preserve*
A 130 acre private nature preserve

Village of East Aurora:

- *Hamlin Park*
Includes a rotary bandstand and a quarter-mile running track
- *Hawk Creek Wildlife Rehabilitation Center*
Educational programs available
- *Sinking Pond Wildlife Sanctuary*
- *Knox Farm State Park*

Given the numerous issues and management concerns at Hunters Creek Park, the Master Plan recommendations listed below have been broken into the following categories:

1. *General*
2. *Environmental Sustainability*
3. *Perimeter Issues*
4. *Parking / Access*
5. *Emergency Access*
6. *Trail Use Issues*
7. *Rules and regulations*

I. GENERAL

The proposed master plan for Hunters Creek Park establishes the necessary framework for a beautiful and sustainable park setting for use by the public that is safe for “passive” forms of recreation while preserving the natural environment.

- *Hunters Creek Park is considered a “Conservation Park” by the new park classifications set under the current master plan process.*
- *A new Park Advisory Group / Steering Committee, expanding on the current Friends of Hunters Creek Park, should be established to assist in future decision making in Hunters Creek Park. This newer “Friends” group should have representation from:*
 - all user groups within the park
 - adjacent neighbors/surrounding property owners
 - County Parks Department and/or Environment and Planning Department
 - County Department of Public Works
 - County Legislature / Legislative District representative
 - Wales Center Fire Department Rescue Squad
 - Town of Wales
 - Town of Aurora (if interest is there)
 - NYSDEC
 - Erie County Environmental Management Council
 - Local Environmental Groups
 - Gas Pipeline Company
 - *Possible monthly (or bi-monthly or quarterly) meeting topics could include trails development and upgrade, park maintenance, volunteer and Union work efforts, enforcement of rules and regulations, educational programs, problem resolution and public relations, parking issues, etc.*
- *As resources allow, the Erie County Parks Department should assign management of Hunters Creek Park to a*

designated individual within the department, such as a superintendent, County Forester or equivalent. This individual should chair meetings of the “Friends” Group. All future trail recommendations (additions, improvements, enhancements, etc.) shall pass through a thorough review by the County Parks and Environment & Planning Departments, following all general guidelines established under this master plan.

All new planned park improvements would be subject to environmental review (SEQRA) as applicable by project funding sources, approval actions and overall scope of the project.

- *No “active” recreation (athletic fields and courts) will be provided within the park.*
- *Only “passive” recreational elements and activities will be promoted for Hunters Creek Park. Primary emphasis will be placed on improving environmentally sustainable nature trails.*
- *For the future success of Hunters Creek Park, an agreement needs to be established between the County and any/all volunteer groups.*
- *At this point it is anticipated that no formalized, permanent park facilities will be constructed within Hunters Creek Park. However, should future dollars and demand warrant it, the plan would provide the flexibility to accommodate a new modest comfort facility (restrooms) at one or both of the parking lot / trail head locations.*
 - *The County should consider contracting with a commercial vendor for secured “Port-A-Johns” during the warmer, heavier use months.*
 - *Refer to later recommendation for the potential adaptive re-use of county owned buildings along Hunters creek Road for such a “comfort” facility.*
- *For future environmental educational purposes, the plan would also provide for modest facilities (group seating areas, viewing platforms and overlooks, minor shelters, etc.) for outdoor education programming.*
- *Interpretive Opportunities are significant in Hunter Creek Park. A series of interpretive signs could highlight the many unique natural and historic features of the park property, such as:*
 - *History and geology of the Creek/gorge*

- Local history of the area (early settlers, early trails and routes, Holmes farm and other area homesteads, cemeteries, etc.),
- Kellogg Cabin site (*log cabin built in 1940 by Sanford Hubbard – son of Roycroft’s Elbert Hubbard*)
- At proposed parking area (on Centerline Road), former F.W. Hinze Farm of 135 acres on both sides of Hunters Creek.
- Potential map showing earlier farm properties on the current park land
- Story behind the gas pipeline, which originates in Texas.
- Unique park flora and fauna
- Potential ancient forest groves on park property
- Story of natural succession, i.e. second growth forests, open meadows, etc.
- Unique amphibious habitats
- Potential Native American Site (Indian Ridge Trail?)
- *No picnic shelters are recommended for Hunters Creek Park due to the risk of vandalism and loitering during the nighttime hours. However a few picnic tables may be warranted at each parking area.*
- *A feasibility study should be undertaken to determine a viable and productive use for the County owned residence and outbuildings on park property on Hunters Creek Road. This house is currently rented. Consideration should be given to turning this building into a parks-related facility, including the potential for revenue generation. Potential future uses could include:*
 - Possible seasonal residence for a park ranger to monitor the park and oversee public use of the park.
 - Meeting rooms for parks and environmental groups, local organizations and educational programs, etc.
 - Park Comfort Station / restroom facility; could include interpretive information, park related maps, etc., and could be a stop along the Finger Lakes Trail.
 - Warming Hut for winter activities and cross-country skiing
 - If remodeled, one of the outbuildings could be utilized for the storage of emergency equipment and trail maintenance tools, etc.
- *The County should consider, as land becomes available and funding allows, the acquisition of additional property around the park. Future strategic acquisitions would include properties to the north of the park, forming a contiguous land mass with the Kenneulen Property.*

2. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- *The top priority for the County at Hunters Creek Park is the preservation and enhancement of the environment. Long-term environmental sustainability will be considered for all future use proposals.*
- *All trails that are deemed unsustainable or damaging to the natural environment within the park will be closed, moved or improved. Seasonal trail closures will also be recommended for problem trails to preserve the integrity of these specific trails for continued use, i.e. those trails that travel in or near wet areas, etc.*
- *Any activities within the park that cause irreparable damage to the park will be prohibited. Problem trail sections will be closed.*
- *Promotion of the natural setting and restoration of native habitats will be priorities. Establishing a peaceful setting for environmental education and study will be a priority in the final park design.*
- *The Conservation Parks should promote a “Carry in - Carry out” trash policy, with county maintained trash cans at each parking lot for regular disposal.*

3. PERIMETER ISSUES

- *It is the general goal of this plan to establish a natural buffer of varied width around the entire park property, with the special exceptions of park entrances, trail heads, “public” trail linkages to adjacent properties and emergency access points along both Centerline Road and Hunters Creek Road. Buffers will also be established around state or federal regulated wetlands, such as along the north property line at the Keem Property.*
 - *The provisions for setbacks are designed to be flexible due to the varied conditions along the perimeter of this and other county owned properties. All setback distances would be agreed upon under future detailed design efforts by appropriate county officials, adjacent landowners and park steering committee (“Friends” group). In some cases, large setbacks of over 150 feet (50 yards) may be suitable and appropriate, while in other cases, a much smaller setback may be appropriate. There will be specific cases where natural barriers,*

- vegetative screens or fences may be the best solution.
- *Exceptions to the recommended perimeter buffer may be made where the park property abuts or adjoins other publicly held lands where public access and linkages would likely be promoted, such as from the adjacent Kenneglen Property.*
- Exceptions may also be made for adjacent private properties that agree to become stakeholders in the park and provide open access to the public under formal agreement with the County. (Special provisions for modification or amendment could be considered)
- Exceptions would be made for the gas line, which traverses private property (easements) and is utilized as a trail for snowmobiles.
- *Consideration will be given to establishing an even wider buffer around sensitive environments such as official wetlands or areas with unique vegetation, etc.*
- Unless otherwise agreed upon for public access, no trail access will be allowed into the park from adjacent private properties
- All other trails within this buffer will be eliminated or relocated.
- For emergency access purposes, certain trails that currently follow boundaries in remote sections may be best relocated to the new perimeter setback to allow “full coverage” patrolling of the park, with visibility into the natural buffer area as well as the interior sections of the park.
- *Consideration should be given for perimeter buffers around other undeveloped parks in the County system. Previously designed parks, such as Como Lake, Akron, Chestnut Ridge and others are now facing the reality of new development adjacent to the park’s edge; having an established natural buffer would have provided a more comfortable setting for current park users who are now trying to get away from urban life, and would’ve have better preserved the natural integrity of the park.* (Note: Frederick Law Olmsted, America’s first Landscape Architect and Park Designer) also promoted natural buffers in most of his park designs).

- *Formal postings would be made at regular intervals along the park boundary.*

- Two types of boundary postings would be considered; one that faces into the park with signs similar to those used at Knox Farm State Park, i.e. “Park Boundary Limit
- Please Do Not Cross;” the other facing adjacent landowners confirming proper NYSDEC and County regulations for the County property.

- *Due to budget constraints, perimeter fencing for the park will not be considered in the near term.*

- As an example, a simple 6' high chain link fence around the entire park property would cost the county more than 1.5 million dollars.
- *The County will consider undertaking a formal perimeter/boundary survey, with permanent boundary markers set at regular intervals and at critical points around the entire park property. An opportunity exists to utilize survey students from an area college to assist with these survey efforts as part of their field education.*

4. PARKING / ACCESS

- *The existing parking area will be eliminated and relocated from the intersection of Centerline and Vermont Hill Road.*
- *A new informal parking area will be established off Centerline Road, down the hill east of Vermont Hill Road, on the existing level ground in the approximate location of the former homestead.*
 - This location is approximately half way between the nearest neighbors to the east and west along Centerline.
 - This location is relatively level and void of major vegetation, which would allow the County to minimize future construction costs
 - This new parking lot would act as a “trail head” and be located within the natural perimeter buffer to provide open visibility from Centerline Road for optimal safety and security.
 - This location provides better visibility of oncoming traffic for vehicles entering and exiting the park.
 - This parking area will have a security gate that would be monitored and closed each evening by a designated parks employee or ranger.
- *An “informal” parking lot, for the conservation parks, can be described as the following:*
 - off-road, with an appropriate entrance drive, signage (park name, hours, speed limit, etc.) and secure vehicular gate
 - a natural granular surface rather than asphalt or concrete
 - an adequate and appropriate landscape buffer/screen to minimize the visual impact of the parking lot (while considering need for visibility and surveillance)
 - the possible use of large boulders or wood bollards to delineate the outer edge of the parking and to prevent cars from randomly parking on adjacent areas
- *For the park as a whole, individual parking lots (one off*

Centerline and one off Hunters Creek Road) should be minimal in size, and be based on any specific sensitive site conditions. Approximately 20-25 cars maximum at each location are being recommended, with potential provisions being made for limited parking for trucks with horse trailers). By limiting the size of parking lots, it will establish a threshold of use for the park and prompt users to stagger their times and days of use.

- As for any setbacks for the parking lots, determining an appropriate location and distance from the main roads would be subject to a specific site assessment, including consideration of terrain, existing vegetation, environmental features, proximity to neighbors and visibility from the road to ensure surveillance.
 - Once the Centerline lot is filled to capacity, signs would direct people to the alternate lot off of Hunters Creek Road. User groups would be asked to please post this request on their various websites and through other outreach methods.
 - Given its current isolation, consideration should be given to moving the Hunters Creek lot closer to the road for higher visibility and better police surveillance.
 - Drainage improvements need to be made at the existing parking lot off Hunters Creek Road.
- *Recommendations will be made again to the County's Department of Public Works to coordinate with the local municipality to install "No Parking" and "Speed Limit" signs along Centerline Road and a small segment of Vermont Hill Road. However, the proposed new location for parking off Centerline already offers natural impediments to roadside parking. (Note that with "No Parking" signs along the roadside, then the County would need to make provisions for plowing this parking area to allow for winter use and recreation at the park.*
 - *Proper warning and directional signs shall be provided along both Hunters Creek Road and Centerline Road identifying the park entrances. Recommendations will be made to the County's DPW to study the traffic along Centerline to decide whether further safety enhancements/traffic calming provisions are warranted. (i.e., is a flashing yellow light warranted?). It is recommended that reduced speed limit signs be placed at the park entrances.*

5. EMERGENCY ACCESS

- *The County Sheriff's Department should continue to work closely with the Wales Center Volunteer Fire Department personnel to assure that the park is adequately accessible in the case of an emergency. Up to date trail maps should be provided to rescue personnel.*
- *Improvements should be made within the park to assure adequate emergency vehicle access.*
 - On the west side of the Creek, improvements should be made to the existing access road/trail, providing access from Centerline into the Gas Pipeline. A gated emergency access point would remain at the intersection of Centerline and Vermont Hill Road; this is also the route utilized by the Gas Company to access their lines in the park. The key could be kept at the Wales Center Volunteer Fire Department. This access road needs to have drainage improvements made to prevent further deterioration in certain locations. The County should coordinate all improvement with the gas pipeline company.
 - On the east side, new access will be provided into the park by utilizing/improving portions of the existing Finger Lakes Trail and the Gas Pipeline.
 - Potential for emergency access also exists east of the creek off Centerline Road. This would require the upgrade of an old driveway once leading to a former farm and homestead.
 - All Emergency Access points should be well-signed and visible to all.
 - The Emergency Access Road should essentially be a wider park trail with a natural granular surfacing.
 - NOTE: Any access agreements that the county could make with adjacent landowners or along the pipeline easement would limit further disturbance to the natural setting of the park.
- *Given the rugged terrain and thick growth in some areas of the park, emergency access would continue on smaller, off-road/all terrain vehicles.*
- *ATVs, with special permits issued from the County and/or Fire Department, should be utilized for emergency 'search and rescue' operations. Also, consideration should be given for having the County and NYSDEC Police, as well as a possible Park Ranger, patrol the park in the future using ATVs.*
- *The County should consider a policy similar to that which NYS Parks utilizes with regard to Mercy Flight*

rescue operations. This is a “if you use them, you will pay for them” policy.

- *A section of the gas pipeline should also be designated as a helicopter landing site near the end of the access road.*

6. TRAIL USE ISSUES

- *For the next phase of park development, and as budget dollars allow, it is recommended that the County work closely with park user groups to solicit the expertise of a trail planning expert to better define, delineate and sign the appropriate trail system within the park.*
- *No additional trails shall be added without prior county permission.*
- *County Park Rules and Regulations need to be tailored for the unique setting and will be clearly posted at all entrance points (trail heads) into Hunters Creek Park*
- *Preservation of the natural environment is a top priority for the park. Promote trails of a type suited to the sensitive natural setting, with a hierarchy based on types of use and skill level; Any non-sustainable trails will be removed.*
 - *The trail system should consist of inherently sustainable trails, trails that stay narrow and dry. Other trails should be upgraded, be removed or be subject to seasonal closures (such as during the spring wet season)*
- *Promote a trail system based on a series of “loop” trails on both sides of the Creek. (Note that no bridge crossing over the Creek is being considered at this point). Miscellaneous connector trails and those trails that travel off the property or to undesirable or unsafe park areas will either be physically closed or phased out of use, and will not be part of the endorsed County trail network within the park.*
- *Proper trail signage will be needed within the Park*
 - *All trail markings/signage need to be clearly understandable from a non-experienced trail user (hikers, Mountain Bikers and Horseback riders)*
 - *Clearly visible trail “etiquette” signage will be posted throughout the park.*
 - *At the trail heads/parking lots, a large trail map, identifying only the official marked trails with proper distance postings and trail conditions/user difficulties*

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- will be provided.
 - Proper warning signage and/or physical barriers should be placed at specific points where the trail travels through difficult or steep terrain.
 - *In general, the master plan is promoting a network of “multi-use” trails which provide the greatest opportunity of use for the greatest number of user types. However, a recommendation has been made for a short, approximately 1-½ mile “tranquility” or “serenity” trail loop that includes an approximate 1-mile of hiking-equestrian only trail sections combined with ½ mile of multi-use section. This would allow “non-avid/non-experienced” hikers to traverse a small, yet highly scenic, section of the park in quiet solitude, while being easily accessed from the parking area.*
 - Although occasional conflicts between various user types do occur, as do they in other local, county, state and national parks, it is typically only a few disrespectful users that do not adhere to proper trail etiquette. These users should be identified and educated as to the appropriate use and conduct within this park. The recommendation for Hunters Creek Park is to better organize and properly sign the trail system, which will in turn reduce the number of potential conflicts.
 - One idea from other parks throughout the country is to have the Mountain Bikers utilize some sort of bell or other notification method as they approach walkers or equestrians from behind, so as not to startle the slower trail users.
 - Four-seasons trail use will be promoted, including Cross-Country Skiing and snow-shoeing over the winter months. (Note that seasonal trail closures, or temporary closures due to wetness or erosion, will be adhered to for environmental sustainability.)
 - *No ATVs and other motorized recreational vehicles will be allowed within the park, with the exception of registered snowmobiles on specifically delineated trails or special permit ATVs for patrolling.*
 - *Wherever public use is promoted, trail safety improvements will need to be made. (In addition to proper signage of potential hazards and user difficulties) This may include trail surface material upgrades, drainage improvements, vegetation clearing, railings and barriers, etc.*
 - *Given the costly prospect of trail construction and long-term maintenance, the county should promote the use*

of volunteer groups and individuals for future trail construction, improvements and maintenance efforts. All volunteer efforts would need to be worked out with local Blue-Collar Unions.

- Provisions should be made for a regular “Trail Patrol” program, with representation from the volunteer mountain biking, hiking, equestrian and environmental organizations.*
- Low-key supporting facilities such as trailheads, information/interpretive kiosks, directional / way-finding signage will be carefully considered.*
- No Bridge Crossing is being considered for Hunters Creek.*

7. RULES AND REGULATIONS

- All park rules and regulations will be reviewed by the County Law Department.*
- Proper postings will be made at regular intervals around the park boundaries*
- Official County Park Rules and Regulations will be posted at the trail heads/parking lots. These will provide the law enforcement authorities the means to adequately enforce park rules (See detailed recommendations in Section 7.2.5 Rules and Regulations and 7.2.6 Trail Conduct Rules).*
- Among the many rules and regulations that will be posted, one such rule needs to be highlighted for Hunters Creek Park - “Abuse of Private Property by Park Users will not be Tolerated.”*

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IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES / PARK SPECIFIC ACTIONS

PRIORITY KEY

- S Short Term *(1 - 3 years)*
- M Mid Term *(4 - 10 years)*
- L Long Term *(11 - 20+ years)*
- O Ongoing *(Continuing Efforts each year)*